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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Call of the Mild

By GALE A. NORTON

Washington — Even though it is noon, the landscape is pitch black. The wind chill stands at 70 below zero. A lone man drives across a vast frozen plain on a road made of ice. He sits atop a large, bug-like machine with enormous wheels. He is heading for a spot on the tundra pinpointed by satellite imagery to explore for oil. When the spring thaw comes and the road melts, any evidence that a man or a machine ever crossed there will be gone.

This is the world of Arctic energy exploration in the 21st century. It is as different from what oil exploration used to be as the compact supercomputers of today are different from the huge vacuum tube computers of the 1950s. Through the use of advanced technology, we have learned not only to get access to oil and gas reserves in Arctic environments but also to protect their ecosystems and wildlife.

Technological advances in oil exploration are at the heart of a debate over America's energy future. Congress will soon decide whether to open up a sliver of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge - called the 1002 area - to energy development. Opponents will pretend that new, less invasive technology doesn't exist. It is important for Americans to understand that it does, and that it works.

In past decades, Arctic oil development involved huge amounts of equipment that had to be moved over gravel roads and laid upon large gravel pads. The machines that transported this equipment often scarred the land, especially in spring and summer.

American ingenuity has tackled this problem. Today, oil exploration in the Arctic occurs only in the frozen winter. Workers build roads and platforms of ice to protect the soil and vegetation. Trucks with huge tires called rolligons distribute load weights over large areas of snow to minimize the impact on the tundra below.

Meanwhile, innovations in platform development and directional drilling mean that we need fewer and smaller pads to tap into oil and gas reserves. From a single platform, we can explore an underground area nearly the size of the District of Columbia.

Likewise, satellite infrared imaging helps energy companies to avoid key wildlife habitat and environmentally sensitive areas while 3-D seismic data imaging improves the chances of drilling a successful well by 50 percent, meaning fewer wells.

In 1980, when Congress created the refuge, it set aside the 1002 area for possible future energy development. To date, Congress has not approved this development because of environmental concerns. In the meantime, America's domestic production of energy has declined and we have become more and more dependent on imported oil.

As part of a comprehensive energy strategy of promoting conservation and reducing dependence on foreign oil, we must increase our energy production here at home. The 1002 area is potentially the largest untapped source of oil and gas on American soil. While we cannot promise that there will be no impact on the wildlife and habitat of the 1002 area, we can promise no significant impact.

In fact, legislation to open up the area passed last year by the House of Representatives laid down the strictest environmental standards ever applied to energy development and flatly stated that development must "result in no significant adverse effect on fish and wildlife, their habitat, subsistence resources, and the environment."

We can meet this standard because of the extraordinary advances in oil field technology. If approved by Congress, the overall "footprint" of the equipment and facilities needed to develop the 1002 area would be restricted to 2,000 acres, an area about the size of a regional airport in a refuge the size of South Carolina.

With this advanced technology and the strict requirements of the legislation, the American people will have access to much needed energy to heat our homes and run our businesses while being assured that the Arctic environment and its wildlife will be protected.

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